

ABOUT MUSIC

– By Mariss McTucker

Ringling 5: Talent Worth

Thousands of Dollars

Engineered and mixed by Don Seifert, assisted by Kaj Seifert and Larry Lovely at Potter's Music Barn, Clyde Park, MT, produced by the Ringling 5, 2013.

The "Norwegian Studs of Rhythm," as they dub themselves, are back at it with their fifth release. The rancher-musicians, who number more than five, hail from the Shields Valley area, save one who's from Bozeman. They got started when they played for a wedding party in the early '80s.

The popular group channels their inner Norski on originals, backed by a snappy country sensibility and a laundry list of instruments: guitar, mandolin, accordion, Dobro, banjo, bass, piano, and drums. Lots of colorful characters get their day in the story songs. The lone traditional offering is the last one, a medley of "In the Garden" and "Softly and Tenderly."

First comes "Uffda Girl," about a man trying to win his love back from the mother country and the arms of another man. Lots of oompah-pah sounds here, and unison singing – a rowdy glee club of sorts. It's a gas!

There's the double-entendre of "I Like Ewe," a guitar and banjo toe-tapper; and tickly piano underscores the weariness of ranch life during a cold Montana winter on "Ten on the Way," sung to the tune of a Loretta Lynn hit.

Shuffly electric guitar and a nice tick-tick on drums complement "Singin' Swingin' Cowboy." Here's our protagonist at age 50, losing his hair and going deaf. "... He simply has no fear ... Rogaine and Viagra always go so well with beer." What a hoot!

And the title tune, "Talent Worth Thousands of Dollars," is a talkin' blues, with tap-tappin' drums and a lightly picked guitar, for a "Smoke That Cigarette" flair. All evidence points to the fact that these guys have fun, and so do their fans. Visit them at www.ringling5.com.



Christopher Mario Bianco:

In Montana

Recorded and produced by Chris Bianco at WilderSong Bitterroot Studio, Hamilton, MT, 2013.

Hamilton guitarist and songwriter Chris Bianco, on one of his earlier albums, described his music as "old-school/retro/Latin/slow jazz/new-folk." It aptly describes this freelance troubadour from Hamilton, a military veteran who travels far and wide to spread the word about his passion: protecting the Earth's wild places and creatures.

As a self-described "believer in pre-emptive peace," who promotes "ecological conservationism," he also endorses wildlife rescue and wilderness restoration projects, and spreads the word through his music.

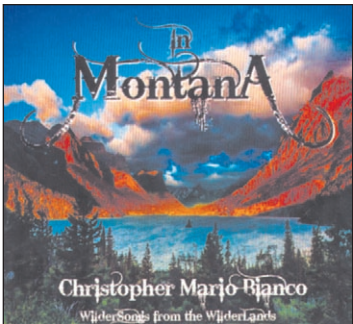
Bianco's devotion to all things wild leads him to write and sing about the peace and enjoyment nature lends the human soul. On this album he mines a folk/country vein, and his story-songs are a retelling of a day spent enjoying "wilderlands, set to music."

Bianco's style is simple and straightforward, and underpinned by considerable talent on the guitar. With an unusual vocal delivery, trembly and almost deliberate, he adds an emotional element with his agreeable baritone.

The sound of wind accompanies a fluid guitar solo in "On a Windy Winter Night"; a howl and a spoken-word intro infuse "Bareback Rider (The Wolf's Call)." There's a sweet, folky blues nuance and a whistle-while-you-walk feeling to "Grandfather of the Wilderlands." And "The River Bitterroot" opens with a cool guitar solo that teems with dexterous hammer-ons.

There's a lot more. Bianco, through his gentle music, encourages us to stop, listen and absorb with all our senses the wildness that we Montanans take for granted. He finds it appropriate to release this effort during the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. That's good timing.

Visit Bianco at www.wildersong.com.



Chad Ball: Corduroy Man

Recorded by Logan Dudding at Red Room Studios, Butte, and produced by Chad Ball and Logan Dudding, 2014.

Butte guitarist and songwriter Chad Ball has just released his second effort, a mixed bag of folk, blues, country and rock. That's a mouthful, granted, but he pulls it off admirably.

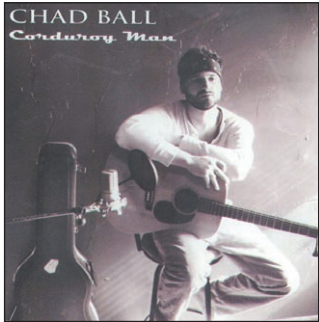
The music veteran's playing and singing style bears an uncanny resemblance to the late, great Jim Croce. He even sings a tribute to Croce titled, "Ray and the Waiter." It's a soft ballad about being offered work if he plays Croce covers, and boy, howdy, can he channel the man.

Ball's song poems, set in country backwaters, are chock-full of life's experiences, sung flawlessly in his gravelly, quivering baritone.

He's accompanied on the album by co-producer Logan Dudding on drums and percussion; his brother, Travis, bass; Michael Paul Masters, piano and keyboards; Sara Zora; violin; Kevin LaFond, steel guitar; and Danny Felix, saxophone. Ball plays a bit of harmonica, too.

"Cold Highway" opens the CD, highlighting his stellar finger-pickin' and world-weary vocal nuances. A country tune comes next, "Guitar Picker," with its bluesy, tight production, wherein Ball sings lead and Travis provides harmony. This one has a great guitar riff as well, Ball kickin' it on both rhythm and lead guitar. Cool!

There's a regretful aura to "Getting Out of Town"; it's got crisp, lean drums



and an understated mood. Ball wrote this one for a friend in his old band who died tragically, and it's contemplative and heartfelt.

Voluptuous guitar licks populate the title tune, "Corduroy Man." The instrument almost seems too loud compared to Ball's voice. I say almost, because it really adds texture to the piece.

"Fire in the Hole" sports a light and burbly piano and a subtle '60s rock beat; Ball's excellent ear for melody and the song's brisk and decisive percussion captivate. This one's about playing music onstage, living and loving it.

There's a waltzy, soft ballroom feel to Charley Packard's "Give Me an Old Gal," one of only two numbers on the CD that Ball didn't write. "... I don't wanna sweet thing, talkin' 'bout the future; gimme a gal who's got a past." He shows his superb vocal control, caressing and crooning each word before adding just the right touch of sandpaper to give the lyric its jaded due. He also adds some sultry guitar work, and a sweltering bit of sax joins the effort. Excellent!

The last snippet on the CD is two verses written by Ball's father, Pat, who died on the way home from a gig when Chad was young. It fell out of one of his mother's old gardening books while he was writing this album, so he decided to put it to music. It's a fitting way to end a well-produced album. There's lots more great stuff here. Spin this one and see what you think.

Visit the artist at www.chadballmusic.com.

Wylie and the Wild West:

Relic

Engineered by Mark Thornton and mixed by Larry Marrs at Sidekick Sound Studios, Nashville, TN, produced by Wylie Gustafson, 2013.

Conrad cowboy Wylie Gustafson, arguably Montana's most famous musician these days, has just released his 20th (count 'em) album in a long and successful career. The songs are all new except "Hey Maria," "Hello Heartache," and "Without You," which he decided to re-cut because they go back 20 years.

The lone covers are k.d. lang's "Diet of Strange Places" and the Friml/Harbach/Hammerstein jewel, "Indian Love Call." I'd be hard-pressed to suggest anyone other than Wylie, save a resuscitated Eddy Arnold, who could reprise the latter number, a magnificent anthem that demands superb control.

There's some great yodeling here. Wylie gives us a sample of his well-known "yodel-ay-ee-tees" on his Chuck Berry-esque "21st Century Blues," and the sweet waltz, "Meadowlark," features gentle accordion as Wylie croons the songbird's melody. Way cool!

The stunning "Cutter's Waltz" is a showstopper. Wylie again sings in falsetto voice, including an echoing response and his own three-part harmonies. Wow! This one makes the purchase price worth it. I challenge "The Voice," or any of those other cookie-cutter talent shows, to produce a singer with a better falsetto.

Wylie sings lang's quiet Patsy Cline tribute, "Diet of Strange Places," with spot-on lang/Cline vocal inflections. "Hutterite Boogie" is a jumpy dance number with rockin' guitar and cool pedal steel. And Elvis is in the building for "The Book," with its all-out gospel flair, wherein Wylie channels the King in fine fashion.

The yodelin' cowpoke has once again gathered his usual stellar recording crew (with the addition of electric- and steel-guitarist Sam Platts, who plays with him live): Dennis Crouch, upright bass; John McTigue, drums/percussion; Jeff Taylor, accordion/piano; Larry Marrs, harmony vocals; and Mark Thornton, gut-string and electric guitars. Wylie plays electric and acoustic guitars, too.

Lots of shuffles, jitterbuggers, and hip-shakers abound on the recording, and the smashing accompaniment is nothing less than what one expects from a Wylie album. Visit the artist at www.wyliewebsite.com.



Ben Bullington

Recorded and mixed by George Bradfute at The Tone Chaparral, Madison, TN; additional recording at Electric Peak Recording in Gardiner, MT, and Will Kimbrough's Super Service, Nashville, TN; produced by Will Kimbrough, Ben Bullington, and George Bradfute, 2013.

Ben Bullington, Livingston guitarist/songwriter and doctor, put out a fifth and final album with just his name as the title in 2013. It's filled with melodic narratives he penned that reveal his unique view of life.

His very capable cronies on the CD include Will Kimbrough, guitars and mandola; Bill Payne, piano; Dave Jacques, bass; and Joanne Gardner, vocals. And country star Mary Chapin Carpenter lends her voice to "Here's to Hopin'."

When he was diagnosed with incurable pancreatic cancer in 2012, he quit his family practice and jumped into doing what he loved most: making music for the last year of his life until he passed away on Nov. 18, 2013.

Bullington's soft baritone, with just a hint of grittiness, couples with a flair for songwriting. His knack for seeing events and people clearly give the songs depth, making them seem timeless. And he garnered many fans as a result of his keen eye.

For example, "Country Music, I'm Talkin' to You" skewers the genre that he sees as having lost its soul. "I smell business in everything you do" ... "when did raw and edgy lose its cool, would ya send me your current list of rules," he sings, as he censures the business for deserting its roots.

"His Chosen Time" is spooky and minor; it's a true story with a ghostly feel about a mining accident in 2007 in Utah that took the lives of nine people. "Sometimes on safety it pays to pay the fines," he sings in the voice of the antagonist. "Wild Oats" is a plucky love song, and sweet piano and a loping feel infuse "The Last Adios," which Bullington co-wrote with Payne.

The folk-styled "I've Got to Leave You Now" is wistful and courageous, and Bullington's guitar work is understated and perfect. His musical descriptions evoke the visual, highlighting his songcraft. It's music played by a man who knows he doesn't have much time left, and it touches the heart. Bullington's hopeful view of the world never wavered. Visit www.benbullington.com.



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State of the Arts

welcomes CDs

State of the Arts welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or *Lively Times*, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.